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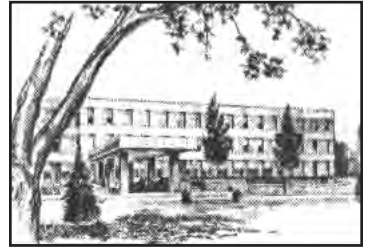
THE ROLE OF SMALL STATES IN THE POST-COLD WAR ERA: THE CASE OF BELARUS

Dmitry Shlapentokh

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FOREWORD

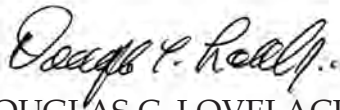
During the Cold War era, most states had gravitated to either one of the superpowers, the United States or the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). There were, of course, states that tried to play the independent or semi-independent role. Still, they usually were not challenging to one of the superpowers.

Upon the collapse of the USSR, the United States had enjoyed absolute predominance until approximately the end of the Bush era, when a multipolar world started to develop. At that point, several centers of power emerged, providing the flexibility for small powers to move from the orbit of one center of power to the other. Moreover, the small powers could on occasion even challenge the bigger centers of power.

This is the case with Belarus, at least from 2006 to the present. Belarus officially became an ally of Russia and formed a “union” state. Still, since 2006, Minsk’s relationship with Moscow became extremely acrimonious, when Moscow abruptly increased the price of oil/gas delivered to Minsk. Minsk engaged in conflict with Moscow—a conflict that has been mixed with a peculiar detente and new tensions. The conflict with Russia coincided with the flirting by Belarus with the European Union (EU) and, even more so, with China and Iran. All of this indicated that Belarus would continue to exercise a “multi-vector” foreign policy, and this Belarusian policy reflects the general pattern of foreign policy in an emerging multipolar world.

The absence of a single center of power or a few centers of power—as was the case during the Cold War—provides the opportunity even for small states, sandwiched between much stronger states, to move with comparative ease from one center to the other.

Even when small states become finally attached to one of these centers, their attachment is not absolute, and freedom of action is still preserved.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Douglas C. Lovelace, Jr." in a cursive script.

DOUGLAS C. LOVELACE, JR.

Director

Strategic Studies Institute

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

DMITRY SHLAPENTOKH is an Associated Professor in the Department of History, Indiana University-South Bend. He is the author of several books and more than 100 articles, the newest of which is titled *Global Russia: Eurasianism, Putin and the New Right* (Tauris, 2013, forthcoming). Dr. Shlapentokh holds master's degrees from Moscow State University (Russia) and Michigan State University and a Ph.D. in Russian/European history from the University of Chicago.

SUMMARY

The following conclusions are drawn from this analysis:

1. There is an emerging post-unipolar world. Now the United States is not the only global center, as it was during the first years of the post-Cold War era. Nor do just two superpowers—the United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics—now define the course of global events. The new multipolarity implies the presence of several centers of power. This provides the opportunity for small states such as Belarus to move from one center of power to another or to engage in a sort of geopolitical gamesmanship.

2. During the last 10 years or so, Belarus moved from Russia to the European Union (EU) and back. At the same time, it engaged in relationships with Iran and China. While relationships with Russia and the EU have not been stable, this is not the case with China and Iran. Here, Belarus has always maintained a good relationship, especially in the case of China. This is demonstrated by the increasing role of Asia in the geopolitical arrangements of the present, and will be even more so in the future.

THE ROLE OF SMALL STATES IN THE POST-COLD WAR ERA: THE CASE OF BELARUS

Those who study foreign policy usually focus their attention on the role of the great powers. If attention is paid to small states, it is primarily to provide the framework for particular aspects of great power rivalry or to give details to the conflict. It is also usually assumed that small powers have limited opportunities to maneuver in the gravitational space of big players and can change geopolitical patrons only once. Needless to say, the victory of a small state over a big one is explained as a result of the backing of another strong power. This notion is overly simplistic, even for a period like the Cold War when the great powers seemed absolutely predominant, and is even less applicable when U.S. decline has not yet led to a clear replacement. Even China, if we assume its rise will continue, cannot be the dominant global center in the near future. The emerging global multipolarity makes the geopolitical scenario increasingly volatile and complicated.

In this environment, small states might well assume a new role. They might move freely in geopolitical space and change patrons comparatively easily or engage in flirtation with various partners – leading, on occasion – to a geopolitical gamesmanship. Their role in overall global policy could also be considerable. Finally, the role of small states in current geopolitical arrangements provides, retrospectively of course, a glimpse into the past and demonstrates that small states are not always just extensions of strong ones. They play an important role in shaping global policies even at a time of the seeming predominance of great powers. The study of small powers not only

demonstrates the convoluted nature of geopolitical arrangements but also sheds light on the geopolitical posture of the various global players, which can be distinctly different. Belarus's foreign policy in the post-Cold War era is a good example.

The exploration presented here will deal with the following: First, it will trace Belarus's emergence as a "free radical," a small state without much attachment to any of the centers of power. This requires a detailed study of Belarus's dealings with Russia—its major geopolitical partner—showing the complicated role of Belarus in Russia's politics, both internal and external. Belarus is still formally a part of the "union state" formed by treaty in 1996. It actually broke with Russia by 2006, mostly due to the sharp increase in gas and oil prices, and has engaged in increasing flirtations with other partners, including those of the West. The break with Russia, however, was not formal. Belarus has not denounced the treaty, and even joined recently in a "custom union," which includes Russia and Kazakhstan.

The Western direction of Belarusian foreign policy is the focus of the second section. The fact that Belarus engages in a sort of browsing between the West and Russia demonstrates, among other things, the major thesis of this work: that neither the West nor any particular part of the West has enough geopolitical gravitation to attach Minsk firmly.

While neither Russia nor geopolitical segments of the West could make Belarus either a permanent foe nor a permanent friend, the story is different with Asia—notably Iran and China. It would be wrong to assume that Belarus's relationships with China and Iran preclude relationships with other players. But its relationships with major Asian partners have never

suffered drastic setbacks or reversals, as was the case with Russia and the West. This, among many other things, demonstrates the increasing power of Asia in geopolitical arrangements – which is the focus of the third section.

THE SMALL PLAYER AND THE COLD WAR

The importance of small players such as Belarus in an era of emerging multipolarity can be understood by looking at the past. Even during the Cold War, the small powers had considerable latitude in their actions, and not all their successes could be attributed to the backing of one of the superpowers. The prevailing image of the Cold War is that of two superpowers shaping global arrangements. The others, except possibly the biggest ones, such as China,¹ could be ignored for the overall picture. This was not the case. Even during the Cold War, not everything could be reduced to relations between the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and the United States. And not only China or France influenced the configuration of global politics.

To start with, the role of superpowers in many Cold War events should be reconsidered. Consider the case of proxy wars. It is usually assumed that Washington and Moscow used small countries as tools in their global struggle. For example, in the Vietnam War, a common explanation for the resilience of the Vietcong was Soviet support.² According to this interpretation, the Vietnam War was a classic proxy war between two superpowers. Thus, it was a victory not of Vietnam but of the USSR, with China playing some additional role.³ Recent events might question this conclusion, or at least modify it. In Afghanistan, the Taliban has

no superpower backing. There is possibly some support from neighbors such as Pakistan and Iran.⁴ But, in contrast to the USSR's support of North Vietnam, this support is indirect, and neither state can be compared with the USSR. Yet, the Taliban has continued for many years and may compel the United States to withdraw completely. Taking these events into consideration, one could infer that the North Vietnam victory was not so predicated on Soviet and Chinese support as assumed, or at least their role should not be overestimated.

There was also a case when the superpowers were not able to stop a conflict. The Iran-Iraq war was not caused by superpower Cold War rivalry.⁵ The USSR tried to stop the conflict, because it had a good relationship with Iraq and was trying to exploit Iran's belligerent stand against the United States. Moscow pursued a policy of strict neutrality⁶ and only later shifted support, not full commitment, toward Iraq. The war continued for 8 years.

Small countries can also maintain a relationship with competing superpowers and use that conflict in their own interests with impunity. Romania, for example—part of the Warsaw Pact—saw Moscow use force against Pact members who tried to break with Moscow, or whom Moscow believed could create problems. All Soviet leaders employed force to deal with problems in the East European Empire, even Leonid Brezhnev, who clearly was in favor of detente.⁷ Romanian leader Nikolai Ceausescu knew he risked Moscow's wrath by attempting an independent foreign policy, but he openly defied Moscow and visited China in 1978, praising its leaders.⁸ The relationship developed in spite of an extremely tense relationship between Moscow and Beijing. Romania also main-

tained a relationship with Israel and demonstrated support to Zionism and Jewish culture in general—a position unthinkable in the USSR. Indeed, in 1965, when Ceausescu became Party General Secretary, a new Jewish Center was created in a Romanian city. “The center, consisting of a synagogue, library, and club hall, became the gathering place for the whole community.”⁹ These conspicuous demonstrations of pro-Zionist sympathies were made despite Moscow’s broken relationship with Israel and firm position on the side of Israel’s enemies. Thus, small powers played an important role even during the Cold War era.

Their role has become even more important in the present. One of the most important reasons is the declining role of the United States. With the collapse of the USSR, the United States had absolute predominance and assumed it could deal with all global problems alone. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld’s doctrine of a general geopolitical post-Cold War order, and President George W. Bush’s policy, assumed that the United States could wage several local wars simultaneously and contain both China and Russia. In President Barack Obama’s foreign policy, by contrast, the emphasis is on sharing responsibilities with other countries—with the tacit admission that the United States cannot deal with all problems alone. The new policy and implicit limits can be easily seen in the 2011 war in Libya. In Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States acted unilaterally, at least in the early stages, and engaged in ground operations. In Libya, Washington emphasized that the United States is just one of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) nations involved, and no ground troops were sent.

The terrorist attack of September 11, 2001 (9/11), also underscored the ability of a small player to inflict a serious blow against a superpower. It is not surprising

that there is increasing interest in the study of asymmetric warfare. Whereas barely five books on the topic were published in 1996-98, 120 books were published in 2009-11, according to WorldCat, the comprehensive electronic catalog.¹⁰

While global U.S. influence will most likely decline in the future,¹¹ as demonstrated by financial problems and severe budget cuts, no one power can replace the United States soon. Even if China continues to rise and the center of world gravity moves to Asia, it will take time, and for a while no clear Cold War-style centers will exist. Global volatility will increase, and smaller powers will play more important roles. Belarus may be one of them.

RUSSIAN DIRECTION: FROM “UNION STATE” TO CONFLICT

By the end of the Yeltsin era, Belarus had formed a “union state” with Russia. Both Boris Yeltsin and Alexander Lukashenko had different ideas in mind. For Yeltsin, the union with Belarus was a way of appeasing influential “Red to Brown” electorate nostalgia for the USSR. Lukashenko believed that union with Russia provided him a chance to replace Yeltsin. By the end of Vladimir Putin’s presidency – or, to be precise, his first presidency – for he will replace Dmitry Medvedev in 2012 – Moscow has no need for Lukashenko. Moreover, Lukashenko was increasingly seen as a liability; by the beginning of Medvedev’s presidency, Moscow and Minsk had engaged in a sort of “Cold War,” regardless of the fact that both of them were part of a “union” state.

The Beginning of Medvedev's Term and Russian/Belarusian "Cold War."

The beginning of Medvedev's presidency saw intensifying Russian/Belarusian hostility. Conflicts flared on several fronts. First, and apparently most importantly, the two countries were engaged in protracted economic warfare. Moscow cut or reduced delivery of oil/gas to Belarus, accusing Minsk of not paying for the goods. Moscow also suspended loans, engaged in trade war, and attempted a hostile takeover of the commanding heights of the Belarusian economy. Minsk counterattacked, blocking delivery of Russian gas to Europe and engaging in a trade war of its own. Russia assumed the regime in Minsk was too weak to survive, much less retaliate, and would inevitably collapse under Russian pressure. Lukashenko believed, not without grounds, that Moscow was preparing to remove him through some sort of "orange revolution." Second, on the military front, Minsk apparently had the upper hand. Lukashenko threatened to end military cooperation with Moscow, implying that he could actually let NATO emerge on Russia's western border. Third, Lukashenko made a move with no tangible benefits, designed just to upset Moscow: he chose to deal with Georgia and refused to recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which emerged as Russian protectorates after the 2008 Russo-Georgian War. Finally, there was a personal vendetta, in which Lukashenko and Putin/Medvedev presented each other in a very negative light.

The Economic War: Oil/Gas and Trade as Weapons.

The supply of Russian oil/gas was the major bone of contention during Putin's presidency and continued to be so at the beginning of Medvedev's. The conflict between Minsk and Moscow had intensified by 2010, as Lukashenko approached an election, and cheap oil/gas was a crucial election issue. Moscow had quite different plans: to get as much cash as possible by charging Minsk as much as it could – imposing customs duties for oil or oil products Minsk resold to the West and minimizing oil/gas transfer to the West. This quest for cash was the most important but not the only reason for Russia's policy. The Kremlin believed that creating problems for Lukashenko would make him pliable or lead to his removal and replacement by someone who would better suit Moscow's interests. Both sides used their usual weapons. Moscow threatened not to deliver oil/gas to Belarus; Minsk threatened not to let Moscow oil/gas get to Europe and pointed out it could live with or without the requested loans.

Moscow also used trade war as punishment or, at least, to say it was displeased with the Minsk policy. Trade war was one of the weapons Moscow used to punish its neighbors from the former USSR. The economic mechanism that the former Soviet states inherited was designed to suit the needs of a single economic, and especially political, body. Even the economies of the East European satellites were designed for that purpose. Detachment from this single economic space was quite painful. Goods that were largely consumed inside the USSR had trouble finding customers in the West or elsewhere. Selling these goods was also hampered by trade and other restrictions, so Russia often continued to be the only customer. Moscow took ad-

vantage of this situation and, in conflicts with republics of the former USSR, used trade bans as punishment. The official justification was that products were not of good quality and selling them in Russia created a danger for consumers.

Moscow also used trade bans to achieve important economic and geopolitical concessions, a policy related to the new imperialism that emerged in the Putin era. To be sure, it was no departure from the Yeltsin elite's narrow pragmatism, with a drive for cash as the major motivation for all ventures. The Putin elite were even more pragmatic, with an important difference from the Yeltsin elite: They understood the importance of the state in achieving their interests. Symbiosis of state and business led to a new sort of imperialism, an arrangement with Old Yeltsin-era tycoons—those who accepted the role of *gamustat* bureaucracy, which in the Putin era became not just a willing tool of the tycoons, but a force in its own right. The tycoons and the new assertive Putin bureaucracy engaged in mutually beneficial symbiosis. The tycoons were to “share” profits with the state bureaucracy and sponsor various public projects the state regarded as important, for example, the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics. The state would help business promote its interests abroad, including buying command heights in the economies of foreign countries. In this arrangement, both business and the state benefit economically, and the state enhances its geopolitical influence.

Lukashenko's refusal to follow Moscow's bidding and, of course, other transgressions, led to Moscow's ire, and resumed hostility was evident soon after Medvedev became president. According to the Belarusian President, the conflict stemmed from Minsk's reluctance to accept Russia's terms for integration—including Russian control of Belarusian production

facilities — and Belarusian support of Kremlin foreign policy. Moscow immediately translated its displeasure into economic sanctions. “The conflict included Russia’s ban on importing Belarusian milk, refusal to provide a loan for Belarus, and that Belarus pay more for natural gas.”¹² By the summer of 2009, Minsk and Moscow clearly were engaged in full-scale economic war along all fronts. While Moscow created problems for selling Belarusian goods in Russia, Minsk tried to create the same problems for Russian goods in Belarus.¹³

The year 2010 had barely started, when a new conflict between the two states was in the air, and this bothered Europeans. Europeans were afraid the “Russia/Belarus disagreement on ‘oil export tariff’ could lead to a midwinter fuel shut-off on the Continent.”¹⁴ European fears were quite justifiable, because of Lukashenko’s problems with Moscow about oil.¹⁵ Lukashenko claimed that expensive Russian oil/gas had very negative implications for the Belarusian economy. Moscow claimed Minsk actually made money reselling cheap Russian oil to the West, and introduced custom duties on oil products to Belarus. Minsk protested.¹⁶

Russia also employed other economic means to compel Lukashenko to listen to its requests. In 2008, Russia promised Belarus a loan and provided part of it. In May 2010, Moscow said it might not give the next portion, because it was worried about Belarusian financial solvency.¹⁷ Under such pressure, Lukashenko seemed ready to compromise. According to the Russian newspaper *Gazeta.Ru*, he would give Russia the major Belarusian oil company, Beltransgaz, if Moscow would reduce the price of oil. Moscow rejected this proposal, but Putin hinted that after ratification of the agreement for a single economic space (*edinoe ekonomicheskoe prostranstvo*), Russia could change its position

on the customs duties.¹⁸ By summer, the conflict was once again in full swing. In June, Belarus and Russia engaged in a gas war in which each claimed the other did not pay in full for gas or transit.¹⁹

In addition to oil/gas issues, there were other front line concerns. Russia started to create problems for Belarusian goods, especially dairy products, claiming they were of bad quality and dangerous to health. (This was hardly a new tactic: When the Russia/Georgia relationship soured, Moscow announced Georgian mineral water and alcoholic beverages were of bad quality and could not be sold in Russia.) Customs duties on oil continued to be high, at least in Minsk's view. Belarus engaged in discussions with Russia about these duties and declared it would raise the price for transit of Russian oil through Belarus.²⁰ Increasingly infuriated, Moscow apparently wanted not just to get cash from Minsk but to overthrow Lukashenko. It was clear Moscow assumed anyone would be better than Lukashenko; in pursuing this goal, Moscow ironically tried to employ the weapons it itself hated and feared most—so-called “orange revolutions.”

Russia as an Organizer of an “Orange Revolution.”

Most Russians believed that the “orange revolutions”—the revolutions that have swept through post-Soviet space in the 2000s—were largely arranged by outside forces. Most Russian pundits believed that it was the United States that was behind the revolts—the goal of which was to put in power pro-American regimes. The Kremlin believed that it could well do the same—organize “orange revolutions”—with the states that displease it. It was also assumed by many that Moscow played a considerable role in removing the Bakiyev regime in Kyrgyzstan.

The possibility that Moscow could do the same in Minsk was clearly in Lukashenko's mind, and certainly provides an additional reason for hostility to Moscow. After the 2010 revolutions in Kyrgyzstan, Lukashenko not only provided asylum for Bakiyev, but stated that Russia, with tacit U.S. approval, wanted to incite the same type of upheaval in Belarus, and that he would suppress such a revolt mercilessly.²¹ In another interview, also in April 2010, after the Kyrgyz revolution, Lukashenko elaborated on plans to remove him. Responding to statements by some Russian observers that Belarus was moving to the Kyrgyz scenario because of Lukashenko's policy, Lukashenko provided his own explanation of events. He stated that Russia, Kazakhstan, and the United States work in unison to overthrow governments they do not like, including the late Kyrgyz government. They would try to this in Belarus, but they would fail.²²

In October 2010, as elections approached, Lukashenko openly proclaimed that Moscow wanted to overthrow him and was providing funds to his political enemies. He noted that if Moscow did not recognize his re-election, he would break any relationship with Russia.²³ Lukashenko's invectives toward Moscow were not groundless. According to some reports, Russia planned to suffocate Belarus through an economic blockade that would lead to mass uprisings, collapse of the regime, and absorption of Belarus as a Russian province.²⁴ After the violent demonstrations in December 2010 following Lukashenko's re-election, he proclaimed that Moscow worked together with the West to remove him and supported the opposition. The sense that Moscow wanted to see the collapse of the Belarusian economy and regime change in the American manner certainly provided Lukash-

enko with arguments that Russia was not an ally but an enemy, with whom military cooperation should be halted.

No Military Cooperation with Russia.

A major reason for Moscow to be engaged with Belarus, or at least the reason provided to the public, was Minsk's importance as a military ally. It was the only ally on the Western border, where Russia faced NATO. Besides the Western border, Russia of course, has serious problems in the south, where jihadism and general instability in Central Asia increasingly bother the Kremlin. Belarus is far from this region, but Moscow hoped Minsk could play a role as part of the broad military alliance of post-Soviet states. Minsk understood it still had geopolitical/military value, at least in the eyes of some members of the Russian elite. Minsk started to act accordingly, making it increasingly clear that it might not be an ally any longer. Certainly Belarus would not engage in military ventures at Russia's request. Moreover, Lukashenko sent the message that he could abandon the military alliance with Russia completely and drop all security arrangements in which Russia was involved. At its February 2009 meeting, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO or *Organizatsiia Dogovora o Kollektivnoi Bezopasnosti* [ODKB]—the loose military alliance of former republics of the USSR—launched the Forces of Rapid Response (*Kollektivnye sulyi operativnogo reaktivaniia*). Belarus was formally part of the CSTO, but Lukashenko ignored the meeting.²⁵

In an apparent response to the dairy ban, Lukashenka also refused to participate in the [CSTO] meeting . . .

in Moscow on 14 June. Lukashenka's step was particularly unexpected since he had repeatedly emphasized the importance of military cooperation with Russia and asserted that Belarus and Russia had never experienced any problems in this area.²⁶

Lukashenko also noted that he could hardly explain to citizens a reason for serving and dying for Russia, which constantly increased economic pressure over Belarus.²⁷ In an interview in *Izvestiia*,

Lukashenko seemed to suggest that he opposed deeper integration into a military alliance whose seven members include four Central Asian states. 'Why should my men fight in Kazakhstan? Mothers would ask me why I sent their sons to fight so far from Belarus. For what? For a unified energy market? That is not what lives depend on. No!' he was quoted as saying.²⁸

Lukashenko also made clear in the summer of 2009 that his relationship with Russia was not a true alliance in which allies support each other regardless of consequences. He regarded it in purely pragmatic, mercenary terms. Belarus was defending Russia only because it was being paid, and could break any relationship if Russia did not pay or especially created problems for Belarus. In a summer 2009 interview, he discussed various areas of the Belarus/Russia relationship.

Lukashenka also admitted Belarus had agreed to form a joint air defense system with Russia under pressure from Moscow and indicated Russia should compensate Belarus for the protection of its western border, saying: 'Do you think that the 10 million people (the population of Belarus) who stand as a shield before Moscow, that they are free of charge? This is priceless.'

He stated that after ‘pumping out of Belarus \$10 billion due to higher gas prices . . . you gave me a \$2 billion loan at an outrageous interest rate, while the IMF gave a loan that is three times more advantageous!’²⁹

Nevertheless, after much procrastination, Lukashenko decided to follow Moscow’s requests. He signed the agreement to create the Forces of Rapid Response in October 2009,³⁰ and a big Russian/Belarusian military maneuver took place at the same time.

Yet Minsk made clear that it did not regard these maneuvers or the military alliance with Russia as important. “Belarusian TV networks made but passing mention of the largest Belarusian/Russian military exercise in 25 years.”³¹ Moscow also sent a signal that it regarded the maneuvers—in fact, the entire military cooperation with Minsk—as of no great importance and rejected Minsk’s request for a loan at the same time the maneuvers were taking place.³² Lukashenko was clearly upset, for he expected payment for loyalty, and he showed this in the winter of 2009. The upheaval in Kyrgyzstan provided additional chances to demonstrate both unwillingness to follow Moscow’s requests and the basic unworkability of all post-Soviet security arrangements in which Moscow had played the leading role. Lukashenko used the upheaval to demonstrate that integration of Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS, or *Sodruzhestvo Nezavisimykh Gosudarstv* [SNG] countries) is not plausible and that the CSTO does not work.³³ Lukashenko’s message that it was not going to be Russia’s ally implied that in certain cases, it could be Russia’s enemy.

Belarus and Georgia: The Way to Demonstrate the Feelings Toward Moscow.

Lukashenko's foreign policy was, in most cases, quite pragmatic, with no motivation except economic benefits. In this respect, he was similar to the leaders in Moscow, for whom cash ruled supreme in most foreign policy decisions. But in a few cases, Lukashenko made a foreign policy step just to demonstrate bad feeling toward the Kremlin. His relationship with the Mikheil Saakashvili regime in Tbilisi, Georgia, is a good example. Moscow actually wanted to remove the regime in Tbilisi and expected some support among the states in post-Soviet space. None of them supported Moscow in this. Absolutely isolated, Moscow was anxious to get support. Indeed, it expected Minsk to support it, but Lukashenko did not. This was an unpleasant surprise for the Kremlin.³⁴

Later, when Russia recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Moscow made clear to Minsk that it regarded recognition of the two republics—now Russian protectorates—as an important prerequisite for a good relationship between the two countries. Minsk decided not to comply.

Belarus also has not followed Russia's lead in recognizing the independence of the Georgian breakaway regimes of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. South Ossetian leader Eduard Kokoity said last week that he would like to join a union state formed in the 1990s between Russia and Belarus. Analysts said Thursday that Lukashenko would keep any bargaining chips to himself and that talk of the separatist regions joining the Russia-Belarus Union was premature.³⁵

Lukashenko incorporated his reluctance to recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia in the broad context of his relationship with Russia: "Belarus refused to recognize the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia and refused to attend the 15 June Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) meeting,"³⁶ and Lukashenko confirmed commentators' earlier speculations "that the recent souring of relations stems from Russia's demands that Belarus recognize South Ossetia and Abkhazia and sell its dairy industry to Russian companies."³⁷ In November 2009, a Belarusian delegation visited Georgia as if to demonstrate Minsk's defiance of Moscow.³⁸ By the summer of 2010, when Minsk's relationship with Moscow deteriorated even more, Lukashenko turned to Tbilisi to demonstrate his displeasure with the Kremlin. On July 15, Saakashvili made a presentation on Belarusian TV. He praised Belarus for not recognizing Abkhazia and Southern Ossetia, and pointed out that both Georgia and Belarus are victims of Russian imperial ambitions.³⁹ The relationship between Lukashenko and the Kremlin was clearly increasingly hostile and has continued so to the present (the fall of 2011). Moscow recognized Lukashenko's re-election and even provided loans for building a nuclear power plant, but soon returned to its usual model. The conflicts over oil/gas prices resumed. Moscow proclaimed that Lukashenko's policy should be blamed for Belarus's currency devaluation and sharp increase in prices. Russian TV invariably took the side of anti-Lukashenko demonstrators. Indeed, only Saakashvili has the same "honor."

The Conflict between Lukashenko and Medvedev.

The economic and geopolitical conflict between Belarus and Russia led to personal acrimonies. By 2009, the media of both countries were engaged in an information war. When the Medvedev/Putin team started a personal attack on Lukashenko, he reciprocated.

Mutual accusations and trade restrictions appear to have triggered an unprecedented crisis in Belarus-Russia relations, and contrary to the usual practice, the Belarusian and Russian leaders personally blamed one another for the souring of ties. In addition, the Belarusian Government paper editorially attacked Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin by name.⁴⁰

Indeed:

Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenka undertook an unprecedented attack on the Kremlin in his interview with editors of several Russian newspapers. Contrary to his usual habit, Lukashenko assailed Putin personally and accused him of lying and denying he had given a verbal order prohibiting Russian governors from purchasing Belarusian equipment.⁴¹

Moscow reciprocated. On July 4, 2010, the Russian state TV channel showed the documentary movie *Godfather Little Father (Krestnyi Bat'ko)*, which presented Belarus as a country in deep crisis and Lukashenko as plainly a criminal.⁴² The semi-official English language channel *Russia Today* presented a similar anti-Lukashenko movie, *Outrageous Luka (Nevynosimyi Luka)*.⁴³ In response, *Respublika*, the official newspaper of the Belarusian Council of Ministers, published the Boris Nemtsov report. (In 2009, Nemtsov, one of Russia's leading liberal politicians, had published a highly

critical report, according to which Russia's economic and social disintegration continued unabated under Putin, and corruption had become an essential aspect of Russian life.⁴⁴⁾

By late summer/fall of 2010, the accusations were increasingly acrimonious. In August, the media controlled by the Kremlin published a report saying Lukashenko was mentally ill, and in October, Medvedev blasted him as dishonest and threatened economic and political sanctions.⁴⁵ A month later, Medvedev repeated his critical remarks.⁴⁶ Lukashenko, usually prompt in response to personal accusations, continued to reciprocate with invectives against the Kremlin. With approaching elections and intensifying conflict, Lukashenko became bitter. He stated in an interview that Medvedev and Putin behaved as dictators and could not stand independent people. Lukashenko claimed that they wanted to centralize power in their hands, which was the reason they had dismissed the leaders of Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, and Kalmykia, and Yuri Luzhkov, Mayor of Moscow. They wanted to dismiss him and absorb Belarus as a powerless province. But it would never happen.⁴⁷

The conflict between Lukashenko and the Putin/Medvedev team did not make them sworn enemies forever or mean that cooperation between Minsk and Moscow would be excluded. Even at the heart of the conflict, Belarus and Russia were part of the military alliance and formally constituted "union state." And recently Belarus, Russia and Kazakhstan formed a "custom union." Other scenarios are also possible. Moscow could finally, indeed, absorb Belarus, making it an independent protectorate like South Ossetia/Abkhazia. This would considerably increase Russia's power in East Europe, not in the Eurasian/Soviet mode, but in

the classic 19th century neo-imperial fashion. This scenario would not preclude Russia's influence diminishing in other areas. China could increase its influence in the Far East and Siberia, and potentially chip off those regimes from Russia. There are even more bizarre scenarios. Lukashenko continued to be popular among scores of Russian radical nationalists and others who opposed the regime and believed that in a major crisis, Lukashenko could emerge as leader of both Belarus and Russia. The combinations were virtually endless. The most likely scenario, at least at present, is that Belarus with or without Lukashenko, will be firmly attached to Russia, at least in the foreseeable future. But the fact that Lukashenko has lost his belief in Russia as a major Belarusian patron and ally opens the gates for other possibilities. One of them could be called the "Western option."

WESTERN DIRECTION: THE FIRST STEPS

Lukashenko, or whoever succeeds him, could well shift Belarus's attention to the West, or more precisely, to certain segments of the West. One opportunity is possible rapprochement with the European Union (EU). A visible part of the Belarusian elite and masses see Belarus as part of the West, and in their vision of the past, Russia has been Belarus's primordial enemy from the dawn of modern history.⁴⁸ "The European Vector of Belarus' Development [was well] articulated in the programs of the democratic opposition."⁴⁹ These pro-Western elite have not been silent. Still, even with Lukashenko in Minsk, rapprochement with the West is not excluded. Even when Lukashenko started his flirtation with Russia, he did not burn his bridges, and indicated that if his relationship with

Russia went awry, he would always have an alternative—the West. This possibility emerged early, and flirtation with the West increased with Putin's advent and the worsening of Russian/Belarusian relations. In the summer of 2002, Putin implied that Belarus could join Russia, but just as one of many provinces. Belarus could not be unified with Russia as an equal, because its economy is miniscule in comparison with Russia's; indeed, Belarus survives only because of generous Russian subsidies. Lukashenko responded promptly. He asserted that Minsk could turn to the West. In July 2002, Lukashenko retaliated with a proven tactic. At a Belarusian Security Council meeting, he invoked a "new architecture of international security" in Europe, with prospects of closer interaction with NATO. "He suggested Belarus would pursue a multi-vector foreign policy. He would not go against the tide, and considered it unacceptable to turn his country into a front-line state or even a buffer zone. He offered concrete actions, with a view to resuming cooperation in 2002-03 in NATO's Partnership Program in the following areas:

- Military research and technologies;
- Removal of land mines;
- Nonproliferation of nuclear, chemical, and bacteriological weapons; and,
- Improving small arms and light weapons control."⁵⁰

Some authoritative Belarusian observers also believed Lukashenko could indeed turn to the West and that this could change the balance of power in Europe. "Dr. Shevtsov argued that under the circumstances, Belarus was likely to develop a closer relationship

with the West, which would entail certain consequences that Russia would not like:

- Dismantlement of the radar stations near Baranovichi and Vileika;
- End of the close military cooperation with Russia and even letting some NATO structures in;
- Introduction of a guarded border with Russia as a precondition for the application for EU membership;
- Reorientation of trade and economic exchange from Russia to the EU; and,
- Growth of Western ideological influence – Catholicism, Protestantism, liberalism, etc.”⁵¹

Shvetsov made this pronouncement in early 2002, and in November the forecast seemed to materialize – Lukashenko said he was willing to personally head the Belarusian delegation to the NATO summit in Prague in late November:

The Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs confirmed that Minsk had submitted a request for an entry visa for Alexander Lukashenko. Quite surprised, NATO representatives responded by saying that although Lukashenko had never taken part in similar events and had been an adamant detractor of the North Atlantic structures in the past, Belarus was a formal member of the North Atlantic Partnership Organization, and therefore, there were no grounds to deny a visa to the Belarusian leader.⁵²

The relationship with Moscow deteriorated sharply after Lukashenko made his intention to look toward the West. In a 2007 interview, he stated:

We will now use every opportunity to promote relations with the West. Why should we squabble? At first, we supplied you with 85% of your Russian goods, and

our exports to the West were many times smaller. Now we are giving you 36% of our products and sending 45% to the West. If they push us on oil, we will upgrade our refineries and will achieve even deeper conversion, although ours is already 50% deeper than in Russia. We will sell the product of conversion to the West in order to overcome the shortages which you are creating for us.⁵³

In overtures toward the West, Lukashenko meant not just Europe—it is only Europe with which Belarus could really trade—but also the United States. He made a clear statement about an American option in case of continuous conflict with Russia and said America had already made overtures.⁵⁴ The suggestion was that Belarus could even engage in military cooperation with the United States/NATO.

Lukashenko hinted about the possibility of such an arrangement in several ways while engaging in the conflict with Russia. The Russian ambassador in Belarus stated that Russia could place nuclear weapons in Belarus.⁵⁵ By not responding, Lukashenko sent the message that not only would he not allow this, but he could move in the opposite direction to provide places for Western bases if Russia increased its pressure. Elaborating on the possibility, Lukashenko in another interview said that Russia takes strategic cooperation with Belarus for granted and uses bases in Belarus for free; he implied that this could be changed.⁵⁶ He has hinted that this arrangement could upgrade NATO's position against Russia.⁵⁷

Lukashenko's flirtation with Europe is not opposed by many Belarusians. Indeed, the desire to join Europe seemed to be shared by a considerable segment of the Belarusian population early on. The chance to join the West—Western Europe, the United States, or

both—was not necessarily predicated on a change of regime in Minsk. Already during the 2006-07 oil/gas crisis, members of the Western elite hinted that they understood Belarus's predicament and were ready to embrace Lukashenko despite all the problems with Minsk.

Lukashenko as an Ally of the West.

Pondering Minsk's options, one could well assume that rapprochement with the West is not impossible. That the relationship was not stable indicated that no one should regard sudden cooling or warming as an irreversible decision; both sides, while contemplating a new step, could well ignore previous statements and actions. In the 1990s, the EU and the United States introduced sanctions against Belarus. This hostility was mostly caused by Lukashenko's increasing gravitation toward Moscow and the corresponding cooling of the Russian-American/Western relationship. At the first signs of Belarusian friction with Russia, Brussels stretched Minsk an olive branch; in May 2004, Belarus was included by the EU in the program "Eastern Partnership."⁵⁸

After a few years, Lukashenko and many other Belarusian officials were declared *persona non grata* and could not enter EU countries. At that point, EU emphasis was on support of the Belarusian opposition.⁵⁹ But these unfriendly actions toward Lukashenko co-existed with other quite opposite ones. In this context, Lukashenko emerged as a politician with whom the West could deal.

Observing Lukashenko's clash with Moscow in 2006-07, some pundits suggested Belarus could be a Western ally, or at least could improve its relationship

with the West considerably. For some observers, this would not require much from Minsk. Lukashenko should behave in a civilized way and not take gas destined for Europe, even when upset with Moscow. Europe could easily teach Minsk the basic etiquette of international engagement. Jan Maksymiuk suggested that “it might well be in Europe’s interest to enter a dialogue with the erratic Belarusian leader and try to persuade him that Belarus could remain a sovereign country without playing the role of bandit on the road.”⁶⁰ Other observers were even clearer in support of Lukashenko. Indeed, even conservative Europeans admitted with satisfaction Lukashenko’s overtures toward the West:

[R]ecent statements by the Belarusian president, Lukashenko, suggest a sudden turn to the West. His newfound interest in rapprochement and Russia’s tougher policy has left Lukashenko scrambling to expand his options. He has used the energy dispute itself as an opening, vowing “never to forget” the support and decency that both the USA and Europe showed at the height of the gas price standoff.⁶¹

Blessing from Washington.

Not only Europeans were ready to provide Lukashenko with a blessing. Quite a few people on Capitol Hill suddenly discovered positive features in the regime. The reason for this change of attitude was clear enough. By the end of Putin’s first term, which roughly coincided with the end of Bush’s term, the American relationship with Russia had reached a new low, and both countries were, if not in a new Cold War, at least in an extremely chilly peace.

All this helps explain why, by the time of the Minsk/Moscow clashes, some people in Washing-

ton saw positive features in Lukashenko. Despite the shortcomings of his authoritarian nature,⁶² he was viewed as a positive individual because he protected Belarus from Russian imperialism. There were plenty of critics of Minsk. Still, the emphasis of most of those in editorial offices and apparently on Capitol Hill was to praise Lukashenko and blame Putin. A *Washington Post* editorial's overtures toward Lukashenko were quite obvious: "Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko is widely known as Europe's last dictator.

What's less well known is that he has been resisting pressure from Russia to annex his country."⁶³ The editorial stated that Putin's imperial ambitions had become clear when he outlined conditions under which the two countries would merge: Belarus was to adopt the Russian ruble and turn over the gas pipeline. But Lukashenko, who once dreamed that the union would propel him toward becoming leader of both countries, changed his mind when he realized he was on his way to becoming a provincial governor. He has resisted yielding the pipeline or abandoning his country's sovereignty. The editorial concluded:

Mr. Lukashenko's disillusionment with Russia might make him wish for better relations with the West. But as the European Union recently reiterated, that would require steps to democratize his country, something the strongman has shown no inclination to do. Still, Mr. Lukashenko's assertion of Belarusian sovereignty and independence could open the way to reform.⁶⁴

Washington Post observers accused Moscow of "energy imperialism" and implicitly took the Belarusian side.⁶⁵ Even the conservative *Wall Street Journal* found a kind word: "The West might not have wanted to stick up for 'Europe's Last Dictator,' but leaving him

out to dry only entrenches the Russians in Belarus. They will be far more difficult to expel from Minsk than Mr. Lukashenko ever could be.”⁶⁶

BALTIC RESPONSE

While West and Central Europeans, and even Americans, in general, took Lukashenko’s side in his conflict with Moscow, it was even more the case with East Europeans, including those who had been part of the USSR in the not-so-distant past.

In the eyes of some East Europeans, Belarus was a small country, harassed by powerful neighboring Russia. Moreover, some of Moscow’s policies also had a negative implication for those East European countries. Russia’s plan to build a pipeline along the bottom of the Baltic Sea that would bypass the Baltic states, Poland, and Belarus made all of them apprehensive. Lukashenko shared with these states a strong aversion to the pipeline plan. He called it a stupid idea and declared it could be easily blown up by explosive materials that remain on the sea bottom from World War II. And this implied that East Europeans, especially the Baltic states, should cooperate with Belarus, or at least avoid a directly aggressive policy toward it.

At the beginning of the Moscow/Minsk split, Lukashenko was still associated with Russia. East Europeans, including people in the Baltic states, tried to demonstrate their loyalty to the West and harshness toward Minsk. Lithuania, for example, made Lukashenko a *persona non grata*.⁶⁷ But, along with Ukraine, Lithuania became pleased that, according to Russian commentators, the “Belarusian regime” was “becoming more and more anti-Russian.”⁶⁸ Lithuania shared with Lukashenko concern over Russia’s use of oil to

pressure them,⁶⁹ and it seems that at least some were willing to accept Lukashenko's overtures. In fact, Lithuania's opposition to Lukashenko was not as strong as Moscow wished, and Minsk and Kiev were engaged in a search for alternatives to Russian gas and oil.⁷⁰ All these common interests and feelings gave Belarus tacit, informal incorporation into the community of at least some East European nations. Moreover, the ties between Belarus and some of these states could well improve in the future.

Thus, Lukashenko's tacit acceptance into the European family was not absolutely impossible,⁷¹ even at the beginning of his conflict with Russia. Remember that Joseph Stalin became a benign "Uncle Joe," and Mao Tse Tung was accepted by President Richard Nixon as a peer. Lukashenko — especially if he had made a conciliatory gesture toward the West and his relationship with Russia deteriorated farther — could easily have been accepted by the EU or the United States or both. While marriage — at least one of geopolitical convenience — between a unified West (or at least part of it) was not impossible in the years of Minsk's conflict with Moscow (2006-07), it seemed even more plausible in the future when the Minsk-Moscow relationship deteriorated apparently to a point of no return. The Baltic states were especially eager to reach a hand to Minsk for several reasons. First, at least some of them regarded Belarus as a small state sandwiched between strong powers. Lukashenko, in that case, could easily be transformed from a dictator, to, if not the champion of democracy, at least a quite acceptable ruler.⁷² Lukashenko's apparent transition to that of a "prodigal son" to Europeans would be especially easy if he offered "something like a Gorbachevian perestroika."⁷³ But even if nothing changed, the Baltic states com-

pared Belarus's situation with their own. Furthermore they saw Belarus as a partner in possible oil/gas deals.

Alliance of Gas and Oil: The Lithuanian Case.

Russia's desire to build a "North Stream" to deliver Russian gas directly to Germany, and Germany's acceptance of the offer despite Baltic state protests, solidified for their elite and masses, at least considerable segments of them, the view that the Western and EU partners are not much different from Moscow. That Moscow and Berlin struck the deal at the expense of East Europe, and the Baltic states in particular, undoubtedly awoke images from the past. The events of the late 1930s were no doubt called to mind not just for Poles, but for the Baltic people, the time when Nazi Germany and Stalinist USSR joined to absorb the small states of Eastern Europe and the Baltic into their totalitarian empires. In the context of this imagery, Belarus is also a victim of the great powers of the West and East. Not only did this make the Baltic states more predisposed to Minsk than to Washington and Brussels, but it gave them an incentive to cooperate with Minsk. Some did so even before the oil/gas problems.

Lithuania engaged in collaboration with Minsk more actively than the others, even in the 1990s, when Belarus's merging with Russia seemed almost a done deal. The relationship was probably approved by Brussels, which regarded Lithuania as a potential go-between. In 2009, Lukashenko visited Lithuania—his first visit to a European country after isolation since 1995⁷⁴—a visit implicitly approved by the EU. In 2009, President Dalia Grybauskaitė herself visited Belarus. In Vilnius, Lukashenko could discuss subjects such as transferring Venezuelan oil through Lithuanian

ports.⁷⁵ The relationship developed smoothly despite occasional problems. For example, Lithuania demanded that Belarus deport to Lithuania General Vladimir Ushkopchik, a former deputy to the Belarusian Minister of Defense. Lithuanian authorities accused him of involvement in a fight in Vilnius on January 13, 1991, in which 14 men were killed. Belarus refused Vilnius' request,⁷⁶ but contact continued as if nothing had happened. Moreover, Belarus and Lithuania signed an agreement for military cooperation, the first Belarus had signed with a NATO country. President Grybauskaitė stated that Lithuania would defend Belarusian interests in the EU.⁷⁷ The Lithuanian Minister of Defense noted that Belarusian military cooperation with Moscow still concerned Vilnius, and that it should cooperate with Minsk to be informed about military maneuvers near its borders – maneuvers that had a “very interesting scenario.”⁷⁸

The close cooperation between the two countries predictably led to a positive assessment of Lukashenko's rule by Lithuanian leadership. Grybauskaitė stated she believed Lukashenko was supported by 99 percent of the population, but that Lukashenko would arrange only 75 percent of the vote to please the EU.⁷⁹ The reason for such an appraisal was not so much for military or other cooperation, as for an oil/gas deal. Like other East Europeans, Lithuanians depended on gas from Moscow and desperately wanted to diversify their supply lines. Lithuania also does not have its own oil. Belarus has quite a good relationship with Iran and Venezuela with their rich oil/gas deposits. Iran and Venezuela are sworn enemies of the United States, and good relationships with them could hurt Lithuania's relationship with the United States. Belarus could play the role of intermediary, so Lithuania

was anxious to engage in an oil/gas deal with Belarus. By the fall of 2010, Belarus and Lithuania had set out to build a sea terminal for liquid gas, which could have profound implications for Gazprom—Russia’s main gas company. Belarus was among the three top customers for Russian gas. Moreover, demand for gas was declining in Europe.⁸⁰

The Latvian Direction.

Lithuania was not the only Baltic member of NATO and the EU that was happy to flirt with Belarus, even when neither Brussels nor Washington was pleased with their actions. Again, their major reason for dealing with Minsk was the desire to cooperate on gas and oil. Washington’s and Brussels’s approach was controversial. They could well be displeased with Baltic states’ actions if these went against their own policies, and in this case, the actions of Baltic states’ elites could be considered a sort of geopolitical disobedience. But these states had a variety of reasons for not burning all the bridges with Minsk, and the same states could play the role of mediators if Washington or Brussels decided to test the waters with Minsk. Latvia was apparently chosen as a possible bridge. This was the reason neither Washington nor Brussels objected to a Belarus rapprochement with Latvia.

Latvia’s reason was similar to that of the other Baltic states—Belarus was seen as important for oil/gas deals. Latvia was anxious to use Belarusian connections to receive Venezuelan oil or at least benefit from its transfer to Belarus. During Lukashenko’s September 2009 visit, the subject was discussed in detail. By the end of September, Latvian ministers regarded cooperation with Belarus as quite a viable enterprise.

According to Minister of Transport Kaspars Gerhards, Latvian companies were ready to cooperate with Belarus and offer their terms: "Our businessmen in the Ventspils and Riga ports are truly interested. Now they are preparing their capabilities for carrying out projects." He added that it is up to Belarus to make the final decision: "We believe that Belarus can choose the best way to transport oil from Venezuela from the financial and technical points of view. We are ready for cooperation." Speaking about oil transportation, Gerhards reminded his audience that Belarus transports oil from Venezuela, with transshipment to Ukraine, Lithuania, and Estonia. Transportation tariffs for Belarus are the same in Ukraine and Lithuania. "Now we are negotiating the possibility of Venezuelan oil transshipment via Ventspils and Riga. The decision depends on what tariffs we are offered. The oil will flow where the terms are most competitive." The Minister added that there would be no problems transporting oil by railroad.⁸¹ Lukashenko was much encouraged by this sign of cooperation, and made the point clearly enough. Latvia not only could help Belarus get Venezuelan oil, but could also sell this oil to other Baltic states. Another interpretation of Lukashenko's comments could be that Belarus itself could sell Venezuelan oil to the Baltic states.⁸²

Estonian Connection.

Estonia has less of a relationship with Belarus than do the other Baltic states. The reasons are manifold. Tallinn had the most uncompromised views of Moscow. Following the demise of the USSR, resentment was so high in Estonia that it might have been the only state in Eastern Europe not only to remove the

monument of a Soviet soldier from its original place, but actually to transfer the physical remains of Red Army soldiers beneath the monument. Tallinn had conducted often bluntly discriminatory policy toward Russian-speaking—mostly ethnic Russian—Estonian residents. Estonia was also perhaps more anxious to be integrated into the EU than other Baltic states, and was the only one accepted into the Euro zone. Belarus, a Slavic state closely associated with Russia for a long time, was hardly a country that excited Tallinn. But the smell of oil/gas pushed Tallinn closer to Minsk, especially when Minsk's relationship with Moscow soured and Estonia started to perceive Belarus—not as a Russian satellite, but—as a small European country bullied by a much bigger neighbor. Minsk did not discard the chance for cooperation with Tallinn, and Lukashenko stated that Belarus planned to transfer some Venezuelan oil through Estonia.⁸³ The desire of some East European states to cooperate with Belarus did not diminish much even after the cooling of the EU/U.S. relationship with Minsk.

What is the implication of Minsk's relationship with the West? First, it demonstrates the ease with which Minsk moved from one center of power (Moscow), so recently its geopolitical patron, to the West. Lukashenko not only planned to engage in close relationships with Western countries—Moscow itself was eager to do the same—but threatened to help NATO upgrade its military capabilities on Russia's western borders. Such a threat would have been unthinkable in the Soviet era. Even Romania, with all its flirtations with the USSR's enemies, never threatened to leave the Warsaw Pact, much less let a NATO military installation be built in its territory. The reason was simple: The Brezhnev doctrine would be immediately employed with Soviet troops invading Romania.

Soviet-type actions in the era of bipolarity would also be quite decisive, but post-Soviet Moscow could not do much. It is possible that in the wake of the 2008 Georgia/Russia War, Moscow thought to engage in regime change in Minsk. But the people in the Kremlin assumed these actions would be quite risky. The problem was not so much NATO's response—most likely both Washington and Brussels would be acquiescent—but Belarus's resistance. Lukashenko's flirting with the West clearly demonstrated Moscow's weakness, but also that the West could not be the absolute pole of gravity it was in the early post-Cold War era. Some segments of the Western establishment—in both Washington and Brussels—were clearly pleased by the tension between Minsk and Moscow, but they did not make Lukashenko a full-fledged ally. The popular explanation is that the West was concerned with Lukashenko's authoritarianism. The role of his human rights transgressions should not, however, be overestimated. The West—Washington, for example—dealt with a variety of authoritarian/totalitarian rulers from Mao to the Shah of Iran, if geopolitical necessity required it. The West could overthrow legitimately elected leaders, such as President Salvador Allende in Chile by General Augusto Pinochet. Thus, human rights transgressions were hardly the major reason.

The point was that in case of a complete break with Russia, Lukashenko would demand considerable economic help from the West to compensate for the final divorce. Neither Washington nor Brussels had enough spare cash to do this. Other problems prevented the West from detaching Minsk from Moscow completely. The West was divided, not only by friction between the United States and the EU, but in Europe itself. For example, quite a few people in the Baltic states and

other East European countries became suspicious and often bitter, not only toward Russia but toward the great Western powers, to which they often attributed their misery. Many of them saw Belarus as a fellow small state squeezed between powerful nations; Belarus could understand the small East European states better than could the great powers of the East or West. The possible collapse of Lukashenko's regime might bring pro-Western forces to power. Still, if this happened, it most likely would benefit not so much an abstract "West" as some segments of the West—most likely the small powers of East/Central Europe—unless of course, the EU, with Germany/France at the helm, had unmatched economic clout. Absolute dominance of the West or any of its segments in Belarus is rather unlikely. The West would be competing with not just Russian, but also Asian, influences.

ASIAN DIRECTION

While Belarus's troubled relationship with Brussels, Washington, and Moscow is much discussed in both the West and Russia, its relationship with Asia has fallen from the radar screen. One reason is that Russia and the Western powers are not fully cognizant of the geopolitical shift in which Asian powers became able not only to fend for themselves and stand against European—both West and East—and American pressure, but to engage in geopolitical maneuvers far from their traditional power base. The situation with the Westerners and Russians was analogous to the way the mighty Mogul emperors had watched the British. Asian rulers could not imagine that newcomers from such a distant land could challenge their power. Westerners and Russians could not be fully cognizant

that Asia—which has absorbed the technological and scientific gadgets of the West—would emerge in a geopolitical space so far from their traditional power base. Yet, this had already happened, and Belarus's relationship with Iran and China underscored it. Belarus's relationship with Iran demonstrated that small countries ostracized by a major power (the United States) could engage in symbiotic and fruitful relationships. Belarus's relationship with China demonstrated how a small European country could receive important support from an Asian power and also provide it a launch pad far from China's traditional sphere of influence.

THE IRANIAN EQUATION

Belarus's relationship with Iran is interesting and potentially quite important. It demonstrates the potential for small countries to engage in meaningful relationships, when both have an adversarial relationship with great powers. It also demonstrates the limits of the influence of great powers. Finally, Iran's assertive policy demonstrates the rising power of Asia at a time of continuous, perhaps absolute, decline of the West.

The Early Rapprochement.

The Minsk/Teheran rapprochement started shortly after the collapse of the USSR. Belarus was soon led by Lukashenko, who until 2006 looked at Russia as practically Belarus's only geopolitical patron. As for Iran, throughout the 1990s, "Eurasianism," in its Aleksandr Dugin interpretation, became increasingly popular in Russia, and alliance with Iran was seen as a central element of geopolitical policy. It was Iran that,

in Dugin's view, would secure for Russia the status of a great power. The alliance would allow Moscow to build a multipolar world or even assure Russia/Eurasia the global predominance it lost after collapse of the USSR. At that time, Minsk's relationship with Teheran could be treated as an aside to major geopolitical activities. Moscow was the center or at least one center for Minsk, and in some ways for Teheran as well.

Still, neither Minsk nor Teheran ignored the other. Iran and Belarus established diplomatic relations in March 1993.⁸⁴ In 1995, the Belarusian-Iranian Commission for Economic Cooperation was created, and a treaty for cultural cooperation was signed. In December 1997, Belarus opened an embassy in Teheran. Leonid Rachkov was appointed ambassador and continues in this capacity to the present.⁸⁵ In 1998, Lukashenko visited Iran.⁸⁶ Still, according to Ras Suleimenov, throughout the 1990s, interactions between Iran and Belarus were rather limited. The relationship received a great boost a decade later, when the Putin administration proclaimed that Russia should assert itself as a great power and confront the United States — with Iran as its most important ally. The relationship between Minsk and Moscow was still strong at the beginning of Putin's presidency. Thus, the improvement of Teheran/Minsk ties fit well into their relationship with Russia. Iran seemed to be most anxious to enhance its ties with Belarus, which people in Teheran regarded as the way to reinforce their relationship with Russia. In 2001, Iran opened its embassy in Minsk.⁸⁷ In 2002, Iranian parliamentarians visited Belarus. By 2002, Belarus openly acknowledged that it had started to sell weapons to Iran (most likely with Moscow's blessing). Indeed, by that time, Moscow had scrapped the

1993 Gore-Chernomyrdin agreement and was selling weapons to Iran on its own. Cultural exchange between the two countries continued: In June 2002, a Day of Iranian Cinema took place in Belarus, and an exhibition of Iranian goods took place in Minsk.⁸⁸ In 2003, Belarusian parliamentarians visited Iran, and Days of Belarusian Culture took place there as well. The same year, regular flights from Teheran via Kiev started. This helped increase student exchanges, and 200 students from Iran studied in Belarus.

Upgrading the Relationship.

The relationship between Belarus and Iran received additional support after the leadership change in Iran. President Mohammed Khatami was hailed in the West as a liberal—a sort of Iranian Mikhail Gorbachev—who would improve Iran’s relationship with the West. Khatami, of course, did not mind flirting with the West, but he understood that the West would not provide sophisticated weapons nor technological expertise to finish a project like the Bushehr nuclear plant. This could be done only by Moscow, so Khatami visited Moscow to solidify Russian-Iranian ties. Since Minsk was still seen as Moscow’s major ally, officially part of the union state, he assumed a good relationship with Belarus would not be bad for Iran’s relationship with Moscow; indeed, he probably believed it would strengthen the relationship. Consequently, in 2004, he visited Belarus. This was, according to a *BelTA* article, the most important event in the development of a Belarusian/Iranian relationship. The visit provided a boost to Iranian/Belarusian relations. There were increases in economic cooperation. Belarus participated in the 2004 Fourth International

Car Exhibition in Teheran, and opened a car factory in Iran. Cultural/scientific contact also increased; in 2005, Iran participated in the Twelfth Film Festival and Days of Iranian Culture in Belarus.

The Arrival of Ahmadinejad.

The arrival of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad led to clear changes in Iranian foreign policy. One should, of course, not overestimate the break with the past. A sort of continuity might be seen in Iranian foreign policy since the days of the last Shah. In this view, all Iranian rulers dreamed of recreating something like the grand Persian Empire of Achaemenides. Still, there was a clear difference between these Iranian rulers. The Shah definitely wanted to build a great Iran, with the help of the United States and the West in general. Khatami also may have regarded the West as a possible Iranian patron, or at least a possible source of technological knowhow and funds. The story with Ahmadinejad was altogether different. From the beginning, he had a confrontational stance toward the West. Teheran's relationship with Moscow therefore became crucial, at least at the beginning. The relationship with Minsk also acquired importance because Minsk was still seen as a Moscow ally. Personal contact between Lukashenko and Ahmadinejad definitely helped strengthen the Belarus/Iran relationship. In 2005, Lukashenko met Ahmadinejad in New York at the 60th General Session of the United Nations (UN), and the two leaders had a sort of mutual chemistry.⁸⁹ There was also increasing economic cooperation between the two countries. In 2005, for example, an Iranian supermarket (*torgovyi tsentr*) opened in Belarus.⁹⁰

These early encounters between Minsk and Teheran, while demonstrating the desire of both sides to develop a mutual relationship, did not acquire strategic importance as a substitute for their relationship with Russia. One could assume that in this early period, Moscow sent approving signals to both Teheran and Minsk. Belarus and Iran were part of a strategically important alliance—at least in the view of Eurasianists of Dugin's type—which provided an opportunity for Russia to confront the United States. Russia was also the most important part of the geopolitical designs of both Belarus and Iran. By 2006, however, the situation started to change considerably.

Building a New Relationship between Teheran and Minsk in the Late Putin Era.

The late-Putin era was marked not only by a dramatic worsening of the Belarus/Russian relationship, but also a deterioration of Russia's relationship with Iran. As noted, Duginian Eurasianism—which reflected the views of a considerable segment of the Russian elite—regarded the alliance with Iran as the very foundation of Russian foreign policy. It was seen as the way to make Russia/Eurasia a great power again and end American unipolarity. Dugin and the Russian elite whose views he represented believed Russia should not only fully support Iran, but sell it sophisticated weapons and even help Iran develop nuclear weapons. This Eurasianism apparently became part of the Putin elite ideology, and some of its aspects even seem to have been put into practice. The Gore-Chernomyrdia agreement was scrapped, and Moscow announced it would send Iran sophisticated weapons. Moscow also assured Teheran it would finish the Bushehr nuclear plant.

Yet, by 2006-07, the end of Putin's first term and the time when Russia's relationship with Belarus soured, the Russian/Iranian relationship also started to demonstrate clear problems. While Moscow had signed an agreement to deliver S-300 missiles, it increasingly procrastinated and found reasons it could not deliver them. As for the Bushehr plant, Moscow endlessly emphasized that it would finish the project, while finding reasons it could not be finished on time. Iran accused Russia of "dragging its feet," and Ahmadinejad apparently sent an unmistakable message of displeasure, proclaiming that Russia would collapse in the same way as the USSR. This statement was made, regardless of the fact that Putin had called the collapse of the USSR the greatest tragedy of the 20th century.

Other developments made the Iranians even more skeptical about Russian intentions. By the end of the Bush presidency, the United States had announced its intentions to install anti-missile bases in East Europe, along with radar stations to monitor possible problems created by "rogue states." Allegedly the plan was due to concern over a possible Iranian missile attack. But despite Bush's assertion that the plan was not directed against Russia, Putin became extremely concerned and made a proposition to Washington: If the defense system was indeed designed to counter an Iranian threat, Russia would offer the United States use of its station in Azerbaijan. The proximity of the station to Iranian borders would make monitoring Iranian moves much easier than from Eastern Europe. Bush rejected Putin's offer, but the proposal showed Iranians how little they could trust Russia in the long run. Thus, Russia could be seen as a very unreliable ally/supplier. Russia's moves showed that Iran should think about a possible

backup, and Belarus emerged as a valuable alternative. Iran's desire to embrace Belarus had geopolitical and especially military-technological reasons. In fact, Iran could well regard Belarus as a country that could help Iran upgrade its military capabilities and possibly even develop its nuclear arsenal.

While Iran had a variety of reasons to embrace Belarus, Belarus's desire was more narrowly pragmatic—a quest for oil/gas. Since 2006, it had been clear to Lukashenko that Russia would not provide cheap oil/gas, so finding an alternative source was the most important goal of his foreign policy. The relationship with Iran acquired a new and quite important dimension. From this perspective, one could assume that Lukashenko's visit to Iran in 2006 was quite significant. His intention to visit Iran most likely emerged as a result of his meeting with Ahmadinejad. Lukashenko had seen Ahmadinejad before, at the beginning of the Belarus/Iran rapprochement, and had met him again in September 2006 at a meeting of the Non-aligned Movement in Havana. The meeting definitely strengthened Belarusian/Iranian cooperation.⁹¹ It was most likely that Lukashenko and Ahmadinejad discussed their common concern and critical views of Moscow and decided Lukashenko should visit Iran to further discuss mutual concerns and how Belarus and Iran could cooperate more closely.

The November 2006 visit was important because it upgraded the Iranian-Belarusian relationship to a new level. It was widely covered by the Belarusian, Russian, and Iranian press.⁹² The importance of the visit for Iran was underlined by the fact that Lukashenko was entertained not just by the Iranian president, but also by the Supreme Leader, who rarely saw foreign dignitaries in Teheran—especially those from non-

Muslim countries. It is not surprising that some Belarusian politicians saw the relationship with Iran as one of the most important directions in the development of Belarusian foreign policy.⁹³ The sense of the significance of the visit was underscored by Lukashenko's invitation to Ahmadinejad to visit Belarus.⁹⁴ Some Russian pundits even claimed that a Teheran-Minsk axis was in the making.⁹⁵

An immediate consequence of the visit was an agreement providing Belarusians opportunities to work in one of the Iranian oil fields. Belarus would get oil from the Iranian field and sell it, rather than buy that oil from Russia. As future development would show, the process moved rather slowly, but it seems to have materialized.⁹⁶ Belarus and Iran also discussed production of electric energy⁹⁷ and other types of economic cooperation. For example, an Iranian company engaged in building a transport-logistic complex in Minsk.⁹⁸ In 2006, Iran also built a car plant in Belarus, which produced 5,000 cars per year, with the assumption that Europeans would be the major customers.⁹⁹ Cooperation was not limited to the economy, but continued into defense and military matters.

The increasing cooperation between Iran and Belarus displeased not just Washington but Moscow, because it made Belarus less dependent on Russian oil/gas.¹⁰⁰ This feeling was expressed well by Georgii Bovt, a leading Russian journalist, who, while lambasting Belarus for parasitizing on Russian cheap gas, also sent a barb to Iran. He stated that "one particular characteristic of authoritarian or dictatorial regimes — whether run by Iranian mullahs or by a former chairman of a Soviet collective farm like Lukashenko — is that they are unpredictable. They change the rules of the game according to their own whims and wishes, and without consultation."¹⁰¹

Despite Russia's objections, the Iranian parliament fully supported strengthening Belarusian/Iranian ties.¹⁰² The Belarusian parliament did the same.¹⁰³ Despite the objections of Moscow and Washington, Belarus continues to strengthen its ties with Iran, and Ahmadinejad visited Belarus in May 2007.¹⁰⁴ The nature of their conversation was not elaborated. One might assume a wide range of subjects were discussed, including the international positions of both countries. They certainly discussed the chance of a U.S. strike against Iran, and their worsening relationships with Russia, whom both had regarded as a staunch ally until recently. That foreign policy was a major topic could be seen by the follow-up of the meeting; in the fall of 2007, the foreign ministers met, and Lukashenko and Ahmadinejad sent each other greetings in commemoration of the anniversary of the Iranian Revolution.¹⁰⁵

Iranian-Belarusian Military Engagement.

The Iranian-Belarusian rapprochement also included military cooperation between the two countries.¹⁰⁶ This cooperation was at a high level, and Belarusian Minister of Defense Leonid Mal'tsev visited Iran.¹⁰⁷ He met with Ahmadinejad and discussed cooperation between the two countries. The Russian news agency Interfaks asked the Ministry of Defense to provide more information about the visit. The request was denied.¹⁰⁸ Later Lukashenko also met with the Iranian minister of defense.¹⁰⁹ Belarus also stated that its military cooperation with Iran did not violate international laws. But there was a potentially serious problem, at least from the point of view of the United States, other Western countries, and even Russia. Belarus might help Iran develop nuclear weapons.

To start with, Lukashenko saw no problems in Iran's nuclear ambitions. He made it clear that he saw no reason such different countries as Russia and Pakistan could have nuclear weapons, and Iran could not.¹¹⁰ The legitimacy of Iranian nuclear claims was emphasized by an article in the Belarusian press informing readers about American plans for imminent attack against Iran.¹¹¹ It was implied that only nuclear weapons could save Iran from an American nuclear strike. Logically, Iran had the absolute right to have nuclear weapons, and Lukashenko implied Belarus could help Iran in the nuclear field. He had stated during his visit to Iran that "there is no subject" in which Iran and Belarus could not cooperate.¹¹²

While discussing Lukashenko's directly or indirectly helping Iran in its nuclear ambitions, one should remember that he is hardly unique in his view of the Iranian nuclear program as harmless or actually justifiable. This belief is apparently shared not only by North Korea, with which Iran closely cooperates,¹¹³ but by some segments of the French elite, who are not averse to Iran as a nuclear power.¹¹⁴ Former French President Jacques Chirac stated that he saw no problem in Iran having a couple of nuclear bombs. Later, French officials said the President was misunderstood. But the statement could be a sort of Freudian slip; it indicates that some segments of the European elite see a nuclear Iran as a positive phenomenon, a way of counterbalancing the United States in the Middle East. Belarus helping Iran might not worsen Lukashenko's standing among the European elites, public diplomatic demarches notwithstanding. Moreover, Belarus could emerge as an important helper of Iran's nuclear program, replacing Russia, which was becoming more and more alienated from Iran.¹¹⁵ The ques-

tion, of course, would be whether Lukashenko could provide Iran with the needed expertise.

One should not dismiss Minsk completely as having no expertise and technological prowess. Lukashenko's Belarus can boast considerable economic success, recent economic problems notwithstanding. According to some Western reports, "small Belarus, the country with practically no natural resources, produces 70% of busses, 60% of tractors, 50% of television sets, and 25% of the footwear in the entire CIS."¹¹⁶ In sharp contrast to the majority of countries of the former USSR and Eastern Europe, Belarus has preserved its industrial base and may well possess serious technological expertise. From this perspective, Belarus is quite different from Russia, where scientific potential declined despite improvement in the economy.¹¹⁷ The major problem with Russian science was the lack of funding; the problem stemmed from the assumption that everything should be privatized and bring direct economic benefits. Lukashenko preserved the Soviet principles of direct state involvement in economic life and heavy state subsidies for science. Belarus also, perhaps better than Russia, preserved the industrial base, without which, some pundits assert, development of hard science would be impossible.

Thus, Belarus could well help Iran develop its defense industry, including its nuclear ambitions. As has been demonstrated, the two countries' increasing gravitation to each other developed simultaneously with their tense and unstable relationship with the West and increasing isolation from their recent patron and ally, Russia. The transition from Putin to Medvedev did not improve the situation. The sense of geopolitical isolation pushed the two countries closer, or at least helped them maintain a cordial relationship.

The Minsk/Teheran Relationship during the Medvedev/Putin Era.

With the formal end of Putin's first term as president, the relationship between Teheran and Moscow became increasingly tense. By 2010, Moscow had joined anti-Iranian sanctions. The Bushehr nuclear plant had not been launched until the fall of 2011. The tensions went along with those between Minsk and Moscow, at least until Lukashenko's December 2010 re-election. At that time, Minsk and Moscow pretended a return to a friendly relationship. But it was a temporary respite, and tension soon resumed. All this certainly created additional incentives for Iran and Belarus to increase ties and various types of cooperation.

Oil/Gas Cooperation in the Medvedev Era.

Minsk's search for an affordable source of oil/gas was the major motivation for maintaining close ties with Teheran. Belarus and Iran had entertained plans to work together on extracting oil in Iran some years earlier. By 2009, there were clear signs of expanding previous agreements, or at least visible steps in accomplishing ambitious plans. In May 2009, Ahmadinejad visited Belarus and provided new oil fields in Iran.¹¹⁸ The Iranian presidential visit and oil concessions coincided with Russia's decision to build a new segment of the Baltic pipeline, which after completion would make it possible for Russia to send oil to Europe and bypass Belarus. All this made Minsk's cooperation with Teheran in the oil/gas field especially important. Belarusian officials made clear that Belarus wanted to increase extraction of oil and gas in Iran.¹¹⁹ In 2009, the Iranian company Petroiran and the Belarus oil compa-

ny created a joint company, Belpars, for extracting oil from Iranian fields.¹²⁰ It was announced in February 2010 that the company expected to begin extraction in 5 months.¹²¹

Iran/Belarus economic cooperation was not limited to oil and gas. In 2009, Belarusian and Iranian authorities discussed plans for expanding Iranian car production in Belarus, and production of Iranian cars near Minsk seemed to have increased by 2010.¹²² At the same time, Belarusian cars began to be produced in Iran.¹²³ In an additional sign of increasing cooperation, Iran planned to open a trade/economic exhibition in Minsk, and Belarus participated in the 10th Teheran International Industrial Exhibition.¹²⁴ Belarusian and Iranian isolation from their traditional enemy (the United States) and friend (Russia) also helped develop Minsk-Teheran cooperation. Increasing U.S. attempts to isolate Iran financially led to more cooperation between Belarus and Iranian banks. In 2008-09, two Iranian banks were opened in Belarus.¹²⁵ In 2010, the United States imposed sanctions on several Iranian banks — two Iranian banks in Belarus among them. As a result, Iranian and Belarusian officials started to discuss using their national currencies in mutual trade.¹²⁶

Iran has also emerged for Belarus as a market. In 2009 the two countries increased cooperation in agriculture and other economic fields,¹²⁷ which clearly became a launch pad for Belarus's attempt to find an alternative agricultural market when it encountered problems with Moscow in 2010. Apparently, in response to Moscow's attempts to create problems for Belarusian milk and milk products, Minsk delegations in Teheran discussed delivery of these products to Iran.¹²⁸

Iranian Nuclear Program/Defense and Belarus.

Minsk/Teheran cooperation in defense matters — as well as the nuclear program — seems to have started early on, but only began in earnest in 2006. Working together in this sensitive and potentially dangerous (for both sides) matter was a sign of increasing trust. It also reflected the fact that both countries felt increasingly isolated in relationship to Russia. One must remember that not all Iranian/Belarusian discussions on sensitive matters could be expected to lead to practical results. Some were quite possibly attempts to test the waters, so to speak, of the other's commitment and trust. Some could be a propaganda show. The discussions around the nuclear plant could serve as an example. By 2010, Iran was increasingly frustrated with Russia's unwillingness to finish the Bushehr project, and Iran was aware Belarus wanted to build a nuclear plant and was looking for a country to help. The Iranian ambassador noted that Iran would help Belarus build nuclear power stations. There was no official response from Minsk.¹²⁹

The implication was not that it was Iran's desire to help Belarus or even to make money, but to send a message to Russia that Iran was not totally dependent on Russian expertise and could finish the Bushehr plant itself if Moscow procrastinated longer. Moreover, Iran could build nuclear plants in other countries. Minsk understood the nature of Teheran's proposal and so plainly ignored it. Yet, it would be wrong to assume that all discussions on nuclear/defense matters were just for show. There was genuine cooperation between Iran and Belarus in such affairs. One sign is the continuous contact between Iranian and Belarusian top military leaders and civil officials. On January 22, 2009,

Belarusian Minister of Defense Leonid Mal'tsev visited Teheran.¹³⁰ This was apparently his second visit, whose importance was highlighted by the increasing problems in the Iranian/Russian relationship.

S-300 missiles were crucial for Teheran as a shield against possible strikes. Russia and Iran had signed an agreement to deliver S-300s several years earlier, and Teheran, anxious to get missiles, provided Moscow substantial sums in advance. But even before Russia officially joined the embargo, it became clear to Teheran that Iran would not get the weapons at all. Belarus emerged as a possible substitute source.

There was also a sign that Belarus regarded Iran as an important market for its defense industry. Su-leimenov noted that the United States could hardly prevent Belarus from cooperating with Iran. Belarus already lived, like Iran, in isolation, so U.S. sanctions would not make much difference. There was a rumor that Belarus had indeed sent several S-300s to Iran, though Minsk denied it, and there was no way to confirm its validity. There was also no direct evidence that Belarus played a visible role in helping Iran develop a nuclear program, especially with military implications. But the possibility should not be excluded: Lukashenko implied he could use the nuclear card in certain circumstances.

In April 2010, Lukashenko noted in a speech that Belarus still had hundreds of kilograms of highly enriched uranium. He also stated that the first Belarusian government had made a big mistake in giving up a nuclear weapon on Belarusian territory. A nuclear weapon is a great treasure, and he would have given it up only for a large payment.¹³¹ One might state here that Minsk could deliver nuclear materials, weapons, or any other equipment without outside control. In-

deed, in the winter of 2010, Iran and Belarus planned to open a direct Teheran-Minsk flight.¹³² Defense/nuclear issues may also be discussed in the future when Lukashenko visits Iran, as he said he expected to do.¹³³

Iranian Connections and Other Countries in the Region.

For Belarus a good relationship with Iran became important not just as a goal in itself, but as a way to strengthen relationships with other countries in the area where Iran has influence. In 2010, Belarus engaged in negotiations with Qatar and Syria as potential sources of oil/gas.¹³⁴ Syria was actually an Iranian proxy, and good relations with Teheran definitely helped Lukashenko forge ties with Damascus. Lukashenko had visited Turkey, where he discussed plans to deliver Iranian oil to Belarus. The oil would go to a Turkish port, to a Baltic port, and finally to Belarus.¹³⁵ Iran had recently improved its relationship with Turkey as a part of Ankara's overall strategy of drifting from the West, and one could assume that Minsk's relationship with Teheran helped improve its relationship with Turkey. Iran's relationship with Belarus has demonstrated that small countries can stand international isolation or even hostility of the major powers and successfully support each other economically and geopolitically.

There is another important implication of the Belarus/Iran relationship. It demonstrates the increasing role of Asia in global arrangements. Asian powers were beginning to project influence even to different continents, as Europe had done with Asia centuries before. Elements of this new policy could be seen in Iran's approach to Belarus—in some cases,

Iran emerged not as a partner but as a sort of “older brother” geopolitical patron. This relationship could be seen most clearly in the China/Belarus interaction.

CHINA DIRECTIONS

Belarus’s relationship with China should be studied in the context of China’s general geopolitical situation. With a huge amount of cash and increasing global reach—something it has not experienced for centuries—China has engaged in diplomatic offensives far from the traditional sphere of influence of the “Middle Kingdom.” China is expanding its influence in Africa and Latin America, and economic assistance to Belarus would help it establish a foothold in Europe that could have important implications for global geopolitics. Indeed, China’s appearance in Belarus might in the future be seen akin to the British arriving in India during the 17th century and building Calcutta. At the time Calcutta was a small port in a Bengali swamp, barely noticeable by the local rulers who hardly saw the British as a potential danger, or imagined that this was part of the broad plans of strange people from far away. Nor did they imagine that in the course of time this strange foreign people would be the masters of India. We should not, of course, believe history will repeat itself exactly. Nor should we exclude the possibility that China may encounter problems in the future. A serious crisis in China is quite possible, and it is not accidental that an American observer called China a “fragile superpower.”¹³⁶ But a continuous rise is also quite possible, and expansion of China’s influence in Europe—due to its economic clout and the problems with European and American economies—should not be excluded. China’s relationship with Belarus could well be seen as quite important, retrospectively.

China has been increasing its engagement with Belarus for a long time, with the aim of an economic and strategic foothold in Europe. Here, Medvedev noted, China employed the strategy it is using in Latin America and Africa, where investments have been made without expecting an immediate payoff. Peking “made a considerable investment in Asia and Africa to have the access to strategic resources in the region and receive the other geo-strategic benefits.”¹³⁷ One might add here that this foreign policy was intimately related with Chinese socioeconomic arrangements. Its semi-totalitarian system and plain economy provided the opportunity to engage in generations-long projects that would bring tangible benefits only in the distant future.

China employed this strategy in Belarus, taking advantage of Minsk’s unstable relationship with Russia and the West. China would later play on Belarus’s problems with Russia, but that was not the way the relationship started. Chinese involvement in Belarus emerged early in the 1990s at the beginning of Putin’s tenure. Already the Belarusian elite stated that China could be an important backup for Belarus and that Minsk could develop a good relationship with both China and Russia. An official was quoted as saying he saw no problems with such a relationship, because China and Russia were moving closer to each other.¹³⁸ The Belarusian elite has an additional reason for moving closer to China. While Lukashenko has a strong dislike of Putin’s Russia—actually, all of post-Soviet Russia—he has a strong sympathy for China. China fascinated him as an example to follow when he became President and most likely even before. He made this predisposition known in a 2006 interview with Vladislav Fonin of *Rossiiskaia Gazeta*. Lukashenko stat-

ed that he and the Belarusian elite were not dogmatic or concerned with the nature of ownership. Quite a few enterprises in Belarus were in private hands or had other forms of ownership.

You simply do not know that here today, joint-stock companies produce, in my opinion, more than half of all products. But not even that is the point. Once upon a time, Deng Xiaoping said, 'It makes no difference what color a cat is so long as it catches mice.' And China has demonstrated this.¹³⁹

Belarus, Lukashenko noted, had rejected the Western model of political democracy and capitalism and accepted the Chinese model. This was the reason for Belarus's stupendous economic achievements.

Lukashenko had a question for Russia:

And what do you take pride in? In the fact that what ought to be controlled by the state has been placed in the hands of just a few persons? In the fact that the tastiest morsels of the economy have been given to five percent of the population of Russia, and they are growing fat today while 95% are impoverished? Maybe in the economy, as in certain other issues, you still will have to take your example from Belarus? And we will hand it to you, our experience, with pleasure.¹⁴⁰

Lukashenko's belief in the China model continues to the present (the fall of 2011). By then, Belarus had experienced a severe economic crisis, and quite a few of Lukashenko's critics had lambasted his social and economic arrangements as leading to the current conditions. In the critics' views, only a transformation of the economy along market lines could prevent a catastrophe or, if catastrophe was inevitable, cushion the blow. Lukashenko rejected this assumption. He

stated that Chinese observers had approved his policies, and if he erred, it was not in giving too much power to the state but the contrary – leaning too much on market principles. He said he would fully embrace the Chinese model, with increasing emphasis on discipline and state control over all aspects of life. Belarus should also emphasize as much self-reliance as possible. Lukashenko's critics mocked what they regarded as his obsession with China. They stated that Belarusians are not Chinese, and they would not accept the semi-starving existence and despotic rule of the Middle Kingdom. Moreover, Lukashenko's stress on self-reliance, critics argued, resembles not so much the Chinese as the North Korean model; and attempts to recreate North Korea in Europe would certainly fail.

Belarus had maintained a good relationship with China from the beginning of its existence as an independent state. As with Iran, this interest increased dramatically when Minsk's relationship with Moscow soured in 2006. At that time, Beijing, along with Tehran, emerged as a plausible economic and geopolitical back-up. While Minsk's interest in Beijing was quite pragmatic and directly related to Belarus's economic predicament, those Belarusian intellectuals who supported Lukashenko provided a sort of political-philosophical spin for Minsk's steps toward Beijing.

Russian Vladimir Vinnikov, in his contribution to *Zavtra*, a leading Russian nationalistic newspaper, noted that Belarusians stated that Russia's 2006 raising of the price of gas delivered to Belarus was treachery toward the Belarusian people, who had always been faithful to Russia. Russia had played a dirty game. Belarus, Vinnikov stated, could have turned to the West and played the same game with Russia. Belarus could dissolve its union with Russia and provide territory

for NATO military installations aimed against it. But, this would be betrayal of Belarus's own essence, and Belarus would never copy Russia in crass, materialistic, treacherous ugliness. Belarus would not "sell its soul for thirty pieces of silver" of economic help, so it did not, and would not, turn to the West at the expense of Russia. At the same time, Vinnikov stated that Belarus was turning toward China. This geopolitical gravitation should not be regarded as treachery, he argued, for Belarus's relationship with China would have no negative implications for Russia. It would reaffirm Belarus's socialist kernel and reinforce Belarus both spiritually and economically.¹⁴¹

Beijing responded quite positively to Minsk's requests. Indeed, China had already given Belarus a loan of \$1 billion by 2007.¹⁴² The Chinese dimensions of Belarusian foreign policy were not missed by Russian nationalist observers who support Lukashenko. Prokhanov, editor of *Zavtra*, presented a picture of Lukashenko surrounded, the caption says, by "faithful friends"; Chinese leader Hu Jintao was among them.¹⁴³ Loans moved Belarus closer to China and, in 2007, China started to engage in economic cooperation in earnest.¹⁴⁴ In 2008, China and Belarus signed an agreement to cooperate in nuclear energy, and some Chinese companies expressed interest in building a nuclear plant in Belarus.¹⁴⁵

In 2009, China provided Belarus with needed funds when Russia refused to do so.¹⁴⁶ As a matter of fact, Lukashenko used China as a trump card in his negotiations with Russia. In 2009, Minsk asked Moscow for a loan of \$9 billion for a new Russian-built nuclear power plant in its western Grodno region. Belarus was now asking for \$1.5 million of this to be paid immediately, *Kommersant* reported. If Medvedev

does not respond positively, “Minsk was threatening to give the tender to another country, possibly China, the report said, citing an unidentified Russian government source. Prikhodko did not mention the threat, but said progress had been achieved on the nuclear project. ‘We are moving forward and [our] positions are drawing closer’,” he told reporters.¹⁴⁷

Cooperation with China reinforced Lukashenko’s belief that the choice of China as an economic model made it possible for Belarus to be more successful than Russia. In a 2009 interview, he stated that the Belarusian economy worked better than the Russian economy, because he followed the Chinese model. Actually, he noted, the Belarusian model is a sort of perfected Chinese model. The Chinese themselves acknowledged that. Lukashenko noted that he had studied the Chinese model even before his election as President. Following that model not only ensured the growth of the Belarusian economy but made Belarus a predictable and reliable economic partner that would always repay its debts. It was not surprising, Lukashenko stated, that he got \$3 billion from the Chinese.¹⁴⁸

In January 2010:

Chinese Vice-Premier Xi Jinping visited Belarus and pledged \$10 billion in Chinese investments in addition to a \$5.7 billion credit line. The Chinese also bid for a stake in Belaruskali, the state potash producer. Developing a potash business with the Chinese would weaken Russia’s grip on Belarus. Lukashenko has to be careful, though, selling too big a stake would give the Chinese leverage to demand lower prices.¹⁴⁹

In spite of the warnings of skeptics, including pro-Western Belarusian intellectuals—hardly excited at moving closer to semi-totalitarian China—and Rus-

sian elites who had their own eyes on the most juicy morsels of the Belarus industrial pie, Minsk regarded this improved relationship with China as an economic and diplomatic breakthrough. Beijing also most likely regarded it as a potentially important advance, for it meant a possible geopolitical client in the middle of Europe. Economic considerations were probably not important. Regardless of motivation, China demonstrated its usual generosity, providing Minsk not only with investments, but with \$8.8 million as a free grant.¹⁵⁰

This visit would later serve as a sign of a new upgrading of the Chinese/Belarusian relationship.¹⁵¹ While clearly exploiting the Belarus/Russia split, China did not want to antagonize Russia. When the Chinese Vice-Premier visited Belarus, he also visited Russia, where several agreements were signed.¹⁵²

While Beijing downplayed the importance of the Belarus/China relationship in China's overall geopolitical posture, Minsk gave it great importance. The Chinese delegation's emphasis was somewhat different from that of their counterparts. The delegation did not deny that China's relationship with Belarus brought clear material benefits for Beijing. "The Chinese parliamentarian also drew attention to more headway made in the scientific, technical and financial cooperation. The two states have been strengthening their humanitarian and cultural relationship. Inter-parliamentary links are vital for bilateral relations in the aforesaid areas," the parliamentarian concluded.¹⁵³ But the emphasis was not on the economic, scientific, or even cultural/humanitarian reasons Beijing developed its relationship with Minsk; the reasons were diplomatic and geopolitical:

Jiayn Shusheng expressed deep gratitude to Belarus for the support of the Chinese stance toward the most important issues such as state sovereignty, territorial integrity, human rights, as well as the issues concerning Taiwan, Tibet and XUAR [the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region]. He also thanked the Belarusian head of state for \$1 million worth of humanitarian aid for China, in view of a devastating earthquake in the province of Qinghai.¹⁵⁴

In October 2010, Lukashenko visited China, where he signed an important agreement. First, China promised to invest \$3.5 billion in the Belarusian economy. Second, it provided \$15 billion in credit, which could be repaid in 15-20 years. Lukashenko was clearly pleased by the results and the prospect of China's help, and reciprocated in a goodwill gesture. He noted that Belarus was also ready to help China in economic development and was planning to build a car factory in China.¹⁵⁵ Lukashenko understood, of course, that Belarus's contribution to the Chinese economy was miniscule, that diplomatic/geopolitical considerations drove China in its relationship with Belarus. He proclaimed that economic ties were being reinforced by increasing cultural ties. There were 2,000 Chinese students in Belarus, and Lukashenko said he would like to see more of them, for they are carriers of "ancient culture."¹⁵⁶ Moreover, in clear opposition to the Kremlin, which regarded Chinese immigration as dangerous, creeping "China-inaction of Russia," Lukashenko stated that he encouraged migrants from China to go to Belarus and "bring to Belarus their culture."¹⁵⁷ There were plans to build a Chinatown in Minsk.¹⁵⁸

Lukashenko also made the Chinese *yuan* part of Belarusian hard-currency reserves.¹⁵⁹ Similar to praising Chinese culture and encouraging Chinese

immigration, praising the *yuan* had a geopolitical/diplomatic implication. Actually, Belarus's decision to use the *yuan* as hard currency would have a miniscule implication for China's economy, as would its promise to build a car factory in China. The use of the *yuan* has symbolic value. It underscores that Lukashenko sees in it a legitimate rival to the dollar/euro, and acknowledges China's rise to a position of global power to which Belarus would submit for economic benefits. In the fall of 2011, when Minsk's economic predicament became quite serious, Beijing once again emerged as the major source of money for investments and loans. Some pundits regard this is a major shift in Belarusian foreign policy. Still, Belarusian foreign policy was actually flexible in Asia, and here Minsk could deal with countries that maintain good relationships with the West, as the case with Beijing shows.

CONCLUSION

Conclusions and especially predictions are complicated by the nature of the subject. As of the fall of 2011, the situation in Belarus remains quite unstable, and by the time readers see this monograph, Lukashenko might not be in office and Belarus might be quite a different country. Russia could prevail, and Belarus could become "a kind of outsized 'South Ossetia,' totally dependent on Moscow."¹⁶⁰ Alternatively, Belarus, with a victory of the pro-West opposition, could be transformed to a country similar to the Baltic states. Or, in what is at this point the most likely scenario, Belarus would remain the contest ground of various centers of power. The outcome of this study is important in its own right and does not depend on the fluctuation of Belarusian internal and foreign policy, which could be abrupt and bizarre.

Regardless of possible changes, the events of this study period – approximately 2006-11 – demonstrates Belarus's remarkable flexibility in foreign policy arrangements. It moved from sole dependence on Russia to flirtation with the West, mostly the Baltic states. On occasion, Lukashenko even proposed allowing NATO installations inside Belarus. Lukashenko's vacillation between Russia and the West, or at least with different segments of the West, could still be similar to the pattern of the Cold War era. At that time, small states could, on occasion, maneuver between the Scylla and Charybdis of major global powers and try to take advantage of great power rivals. The success of the small states in dealing with superpowers, as Vietnam's confrontation with the United States could be characterized, could not be attributed just to USSR backing; the role and significance of the backing of smaller states by the USSR and China during the Cold War was less than was often perceived.

Small players could have had a certain degree of flexibility and independence from the great powers even during the Cold War. Indeed, the Iran/Iraq War proceeded for 8 years despite the fact that neither the United States nor the USSR was firmly behind either side. But one could assume that the war would most likely have been over if both superpowers made strong efforts to stop it, and they would have most likely done this if they assumed there was a clear threat of global instability, or to be precise, instability not well controlled by the global powers. Indeed, controlled instability was likely one of the essential elements of the Cold War.

The story of Lukashenko's Belarus is quite different in this respect, for he clearly defied both Russia and the United States, and in a way Europe, in deal-

ing with Iran. Minsk was in conflict with both the United States and Russia, both of which had a serious problem with Iran. The United States regarded Iran as an implacable enemy, and Russia's relationship also soured considerably toward the end of the Putin first-term era. Both powers were not shy in using force, and Lukashenko, of course, took into consideration the regime change policy implemented by the United States in Afghanistan and Iraq and almost implemented by Russia in Georgia. But this did not deter Minsk from developing a cordial relationship with Teheran and helping upgrade its military capabilities. Lukashenko even said he saw no problem in Iran being a nuclear power—an idea not pleasing to the United States or even Russia—and hinted that it might help Iran do so. Thus, a major implication of this analysis is the demonstration of increasing disrespect of the great powers by smaller states. Small states increasingly pay little attention to the attitude of the great powers and their ability to use financial ("soft") or military ("hard") power in imposing their will. One might add that the U.S. departure from Afghanistan and Iraq, and its inability to dislodge Assad in Syria (at least as of May 2012), could be perceived as a signs of weakness of the great powers. This would provide additional rationale for small players such as Belarus to act in defiance of the interests of the great powers.

Another outcome of this analysis is the potential implications of Belarusian policy on various centers of power. This influence can be manifold and often contradictory. In Russia, Belarus clearly played a considerable role in the solidification of the post-Soviet elite regime in its early, most vulnerable period. The creation of the union state with Lukashenko's blessing helped the regime solidify its power by creating the

illusion that the good Soviet era would be back. By transforming Belarus into a new edition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Russia would increase its power in East/Central Europe. On the other hand, the same Lukashenko continued to be praised by various segments of the Russian opposition as a leader Russia needed. His role in Russian political life in the event of a major crisis should not be discarded. Belarus attaching itself to the West would diminish Russia's clout in Europe and improve the position of the smaller states of East/Central Europe. Belarus's relationship with Iran helped Teheran avoid a sense of diplomatic isolation, improve its economy, and possibly upgrade its military capabilities, even its nuclear ambitions. Belarus could also be an important launch pad for spreading China's influence far from its Asian home.

One could, of course, state that there was nothing peculiar in these arrangements, and find similar phenomena in the past, in which a comparatively small country could change the balance in particular regions or plainly defy major powers. Nicolae Ceausescu could defy Moscow by keeping a warm relationship with China, and at that time be the USSR's mortal threat. Still, if Ceausescu were to exit the Warsaw Pact, or worse, proclaim he would allow NATO or China to put a military base in Romania, Moscow's response would be prompt: It would immediately send troops. Yet, post-Soviet Russia, which clearly entertained the thought of removing Lukashenko by force, did not dare do so. Belarus's relationship with Iran also has specifics quite different from those of the comparatively small states in the Cold War and early post-Cold War eras.

It goes without saying that small states have engaged in various relationships with each other, and

the leaders of those states might claim that they could opt out of the superpower rivalry. That was the point of the non-alignment movement. But these states did not develop their relationship as a counterbalance to the great powers; Yugoslavia, for example, one of the leaders of the movement, plainly noted that it had no desire to engage in superpower rivalry and would like a good relationship with both. The Iran/Belarus relationship is quite different. The informal alliance of the two countries was built in a way as a counterbalance to both the United States and Russia—countries much stronger than Iran and Belarus. Moreover, small countries such as these can be an important source of know-how and scientific knowledge. This is also novel, at least in comparison with the Cold War era, when it was believed that only the superpowers could possess advanced technological knowledge.

What was the reason for such an increasing role of small states in the global arrangement? For Belarus, this role could be understood by looking at the general geopolitical scenario. During the Cold War, the USSR and the United States dominated the global arena. In the immediate aftermath, the United States emerged as the unquestioned global leader. During this time, the superpowers also built a well-defined system of alliance and dependence, with clear systems of reward and punishment. It was also assumed that only superpowers/great powers could possess essential scientific/technological know-how. None of this exists at the present time. The USSR is gone, and the United States is losing its position as the global center. The emerging arrangements are not actually a multipolar world. Indeed, this notion implies that instead of an orderly geopolitical structure of one or two superpowers, there would be an orderly construction

of several great powers. Some elements of this possible construction are emerging, but it is not the only one. There are signs of unbalance and instability, in which no clear, orderly arrangement is emerging. In this case, one could see the existence of such a state as Belarus, which is not firmly attached to any of these groups, acting as a sort of “free radical” – a free agent that moves from one geopolitical structure to the other. Since none of these constructions are strong enough to dispose of the others, this small country’s position and actions could have serious international implications. Such a scenario certainly requires a new approach to the prognosis for international relationships in the future.

In the Cold War era, especially the Leonid Brezhnev era, predictions about the roles and capabilities of countries were comparatively easy, in the sense that in most cases they could be quantified. It was the job of demographers and economists to define the general capacity of the United States and gauge the USSR’s potential in the future. It would be wrong to assume that this approach is not applicable now; for example, demographic trends can be predicted with some accuracy for long periods of time. But there is much more uncertainty in general, and not everything can be translated into statistical data. It is impossible to provide quantitative descriptions of terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda and to gauge their potential impact before actual terrorist acts. The same could be said about small states, such as Belarus, whose impact, in present political conditions, could be quite serious. The presence of free radical agents does not preclude long-term planning and prediction. But it can make it them much more difficult, and a variety of often quite bizarre scenarios must be taken into account.

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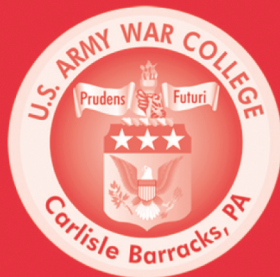
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